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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000482

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NSC FOR WERNER/DORAN/ABRAMS/SINGH

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SUBJECT: MGLE01: ADVISOR TO THE PRESIDENT SAYS LAHOUD WILL STAY, REGARDLESS OF CONSEQUENCES

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador. Reason section 1.4 (b).

¶1. (C/NF) Summary: Speaking with Polstaff on February 17, presidential spokesman and advisor Rafiq Chelala said the President, convinced of the injustice of calls for his departure, intends to remain in office despite popular protests. Chelala acknowledged that Lahoud's continued mandate was sparking a dangerous confrontation in Lebanon. However, he said the President refuses to leave or accept responsibility for any friction that arises from his tenure. Chelala said that Lahoud is being singled out for attacks because he is an easy target. Politicians like Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, who have just as much history with Syrian occupation, have been given a pass. The furor around the presidency is a distraction from Lebanon's real problems and the continued pressure to remove Lahoud will only lead to a dangerous confrontation between opposing political forces that use the presidency as an excuse. With or without Lahoud, Lebanon faces major problems that cannot be resolved by the presidency. The majority should move to real dialogue and allow Lahoud to finish his term. End Summary.

Lahoud is justified in not leaving early

¶12. (C/NF) Chelala said the President is firm in his conviction that he should remain in office for the full length of his extended mandate, through November 2007. He rejected the notion that UNSCR 1559 or other legal maneuvering could render Lahoud's mandate illegitimate. The President's position is simple; he believes his departure would create the impression that he was complicit in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. He is innocent so he will not leave office. Perhaps Lahoud's position was hardened by Saad Hariri's assertion that Lahoud was guilty in the assassination as the "head of the security apparatus." Chelala distanced himself from the President, saying he disagrees with Lahoud on Syria issues, but he added, "Lahoud represents the Maronite Christian population. If he resigns, his history will say the Maronite President killed the Sunni Prime Minister."

Going to the street is dangerous
but not Lahoud's fault

¶13. (C/NF) Chelala said he was concerned about talk of a March 14th demonstration near the presidential palace. "If there is a demonstration from the March 14th group, maybe there will be a demonstration from the other side (meaning Michel Aoun's Christians and Hizballah's Shia)." Chelala said he did not believe the majority of the Christians wanted

Lahoud removed from office by street demonstrations. He reviewed the numbers from the recent February 14 demonstration and concluded that only a small minority of the Christian population took part in the demonstration. "This was seen as a Sunni and Druze event," he claimed. He explained that if that same group marched on the presidential palace calling for Lahoud's ouster, it would be seen as a Muslim attempt to remove the president. "Do you think that Christians could unseat the Prime Minister, or Berri? Why should Christians allow Sunnis to unseat the President?" That argument was only underscored for Chelala by the February 16 statement by the Maronite Patriarch restating the church's long-standing objection to popular protest as a means to dislodge Lahoud.

¶4. (C/NF) If the March 14 coalition marches, they will provoke a reaction from the forces that now oppose them, Chelala asserted. He was convinced that Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement and Hizballah would make common cause in turning out their supporters to demonstrate against the March 14 movement. Referring to Nasrallah's February 16 statement, Chelala said Hizballah's position is clearly in opposition to Saad Hariri.

¶5. (C/NF) "The Army will stop protesters from reaching the palace," Chelala claimed. He insisted that the Army could not react as it did on March 14 2005, allowing protesters to pass barriers against standing orders; "this is the palace, not Solidere." But he said the responsibility for avoiding a clash between the army and protesters, which might lead to bloodshed, lay with the March 14 movement; "They must not allow this."

Lahoud is not the problem

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¶6. (C/NF) Chelala repeatedly denied that Lahoud was the chief problem in Lebanese politics today. He said that if the majority were serious about political and economic reforms, it must enter into a national dialogue with all other parties to reach real programs for change. The President, Chelala insisted, has done nothing to stand in the way of this much needed dialogue. He said the President had offered no opposition to the parliamentary majority in any of its programs. The single point of contention between the forces continues to be high-level appointments. Lahoud has refused to agree to key changes in the upper ranks of the security and civil services because these changes would ruin the balance of confessional power in the their respective services. Chelala defended the President's decisions as justified by Lebanese tradition and political practice. All reference to Lahoud was a distraction. Chelala made note of the fact that the investigation into the death of Rafiq Hariri has lost currency as an issue on the street. Saad Hariri has nothing himself to offer the people, Chelala said, so he offers them Lahoud.

¶7. (C/NF) The president is an easy target, and his departure would allow Saad Hariri to count himself victorious in Lebanon without much effort, according to Chelala. But after the victory, what could the new president do to address the real problems of Lebanon, he asked rhetorically. Chelala also discounted accusations that Lahoud was the last remnant of Syrian influence. He did not deny that Lahoud was pro-Syrian, but offered that Nabih Berri was no less pro-Syrian in his attitudes yet remained immune from criticism. Chelala pleaded for Lahoud, saying that during the Syrian occupation he was helpless to act or resign because of Syria's pervasive influence. Now, with Syria out, Lahoud is helpless to act because he has no deputies, or political power. Lahoud's fear of history's condemnation and his personal pride prevent him from leaving office.

¶8. (C/NF) Comment: Chelala is one of the last people left

in the presidential palace who can claim to be an insider. His description of the President, indignant in innocence, and fearful of his legacy, fits other accounts of Lahoud's thinking. Now, the stage is set for confrontation; Lahoud is very unlikely to leave office before March 14. Lahoud supporters are poised to make the confrontation a confessional one, portraying the Sunni as trying to remove the Christian president. A successful march on the Baabda palace would also test the resolve and cohesion of Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah and the FPM's Michel Aoun. For Lahoud, a key question is whether conservative Christians and fundamentalist Shia activists would respond to being called on to demonstrate, arm in arm, in support of him. End Comment.

FELTMAN